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Return or restitution of cultural property to the countries of origin

Question of Cyprus

Letter dated 9 January 2002 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit a letter dated 9 January 2002, addressed to you by His Excellency Mr. Aytuğ Plümer, Representative of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (see annex).

I should be grateful if the present letter and its annex were circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda items 33 and 62, and of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Ümit **Pamir**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex to the letter dated 9 January 2002 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to refer to the statement made by the Greek Cypriot representative at the United Nations during the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly, on 10 December 2001 under agenda item 33. The statement in question contains unfounded allegations against the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus on the subject of preservation of cultural property.

I would like to emphasize that the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus takes pride in its efforts to protect the cultural heritage of the island, utilizing its limited resources in the most effective way in maintaining and restoring all sites and monuments, irrespective of their historical and religious origins. For those incessant efforts, Turkish Cypriot authorities have received praise from foreign experts and observers who have visited the island on various occasions to study the situation. In addition to the restoration of archaeological monuments, sites have been put into everyday use, wherever applicable, in line with the universally accepted criteria and methods. The Rapporteur of the Committee of the Council of Europe, Ms. Vlasta Stepova, witnessed those efforts at first hand during her visit to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in October 1999. She visited, among other places, the St. Barnabas Monastery near Gazi Magosa, which is in use as a museum, and the ancient ruins of the city of Salamis, which is used as a venue for cultural events. She also praised the use of the Bellapais Monastery near Girne as a venue for concerts and exhibitions for the benefit of the public.

Greek Cypriot allegations of "plundering of cultural heritage" in Northern Cyprus have already been refuted by foreign experts and observers. The Rev. John B. Taylor, a distinguished member of the World Council of Churches, who visited Northern Cyprus in 1974 and 1975, found no evidence to support any of the Greek Cypriot allegations. Such observers as Jacques Dalibard of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Rev. Lars Carlzen, the Bishop of Stockholm and Senator Van Der Werff of the Council of Europe have all visited Northern Cyprus on different occasions and have made it publicly known that the Turkish Cypriot authorities are doing their utmost to protect the cultural heritage of the country.

The Greek Cypriot representative has stated that the island has an immense cultural heritage that "we have an obligation to protect and bequeath to future generations". Unfortunately, those words are not borne out by the actual deeds of the Greek Cypriot administration. Between 1963 and 1974, 103 mosques and other Turkish-Islamic shrines and antiquities all around the island were deliberately destroyed by the Greek Cypriots. The historic Bayraktar Mosque, which stands as a symbol of centuries-old Turkish-Islamic heritage of the island, has been the target of bombing and arson attacks over the years. It was bombed in 1962 and again in 1964. It sustained an arson attack in February 1994. The 400-year-old Araplar Mosque was attacked with explosives in March 1994. The historic Omeriye Mosque was the target of an arson attack in August 1996 that damaged its historic structure. In August 1999, the Hala Sultan Tekke, a most prominent holy shrine for the Muslim world, came under attack when its door was forced open by Greek Cypriot arsonists who poured petrol over the interior surface and set it ablaze.

In addition to such blatant acts of wilful destruction, the remaining Turkish architectural sites in Southern Cyprus in general are faced with the threat of disintegration due to the lack of any effort for their preservation on the part of the Greek Cypriot authorities.

Against that background, we hope that the international community will urge the Greek Cypriot administration to abandon its double standards with respect to the cultural heritage of the island and instead to show respect for the ethnic and cultural identity of the Turkish Cypriot people, in line with the necessary spirit of accommodation for facilitating an early settlement between the two States in Cyprus.

(*Signed*) Aytuğ **Plümer**
Representative
Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus